Former Administration Officials

7/8/73

By Lou Cannon
Washington Post Staff Writer

It was New Year's Eve of 1970 when President Nixon surprised a small group of White House reporters and invited them to his hideaway office in the Executive Office Building for a holiday drink.

"That's a lot on nonsense that the presidency is the loneliest job in the world," Mr. Nixon said while mixing martinis for the reporters. He added that he was not isolated as President, knew what was going on and "can't be hoodwinked."

A different portrait of the Nixon presidency emerges from the recollection of several administration officials who left the government before the shattering revelations of Watergate.

They describe an administration in which the President increasingly isolated himself from his own policies and programs, an administration in which a White House staff that was long on loyalty and short on ideas became obsessively suspicious of both the bureaucracy and the President's own Cabinet appointments.

"They second-guessed, they shot from the hip and they made snap decisions," recalls John G. Veneman, the former Under Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

Former Peace Corps and Action Director Joseph H. Blatchford says that the motto of the White House staffers was "protect the President," which they believed was synonymous with isolating him.

"I called them loyalty freaks at the time," says Blatchford. "Ideas just kind of stopped at the White House staff."

The chief "loyalty freak" in Blatchford's view was John Ehrlichman, the ousted domestic affairs adviser who is under investigation for his role in the Watergate cover-up and the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Blatchford says he had cooperation from Henry Kissinger and weekly luncheons with Secretary of State William Rogers during his tenure as Peace Corps director. He also had access to the President.

"It was another ballgame when Action was created in mid-1971," he recalls. "Then we had to deal with the Office of Management and Budget and with the Domestic Council under Ehrlichman. Only (Daniel) Moynihan was interested in ideas. When he left it became a Philistine environment."

Blatchford said that Ehrlichman showed no interest in the new volunteer agency which had been proclaimed by the President and issued contradictory proposals. Blatchford also lost his access to President Nixon.

Lewis H. Butler, a law school classmate of Ehrlichman's at Stanford, was one of the trusted few who enjoyed White House access during his tenure from the outset of the Nixon administration until he resigned in June 1971. But he remembers that the White House distrusted such important HEW officials as Veneman, Education Commissioner James E. Allen and Assistant Health Secretary Roger O. Egeberg.

"Allen and Egeberg were considered professionals and couldn't be trusted," says Butler.

Butler says he once was asked to present the administration's education policy to the Cabinet and refused because he regarded this as an insult to Allen. Though Allen gave what Butler con-

Portray President's Isolation

United Press International —The Washington Post

Joseph H. Blatchford, left, and John G. Veneman, former officials who described isolation of President.

siders a good presentation, it was resented by the White House staff.

Afterward, said Butler, he was told that Allen's appearance had been "a disaster" and was not to be repeated. Allen subsequently resigned in protest over the administration's Cambodia policies.

"They entered with basic ideas," says Blatchford. "When these weren't accepted by Congress, the press or the bureaucracy, they turned paranoid."

Blatchford says he used to agree with White House officials on the necessity of reforming the Civil Service. But he says the administration was unwilling to tackle this openly by going to Congress and instead tried to accomplish its purpose covertly by planting people in every agency.

Though Blatchford did not discuss the point in the interview, this "planting" was a major source of difficulty within the newly established Action agency where a White House-designated personnel officer named Alan May attempted to fire a number of officials on political grounds.

May was removed after an incriminating memo was investigated by Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.), whose subcommittee held jurisdiction over the Action budget.

The President's isolation and the subsequent disaster of Watergate was Mr. Nixon's own fault, in the opinion of former Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel.

Hickel, who was fired by Mr. Nixon in 1970 after publicly opposing the Cambodia invasion, said in a recent public interview that the President didn't understand the dangers of the staff system he had created.

Hickel views the President as an analytical and unemotional man whose success is largely dependent on the quality of information he receives. When he restricted the input of information, says Hickel, the President also created the conditions for Watergate.

None of the officials interviewed said that illegal acts were urged upon them by the White House staff.

All the former administration officials complain of a consistent lack of commitment to an identifiable principle of governing. Sometimes, they said, this lack of ideology allowed subordinates to push through worthwhile programs.

"The President didn't care very much about what our education and health policies were just as long as they were salable," said Butler. "This was also true for environmental programs."

Blatchford, asked why he didn't speak out critically in public when he left the administration, said he didn't want to harm either the Peace Corps or the other Action volunteer programs, which have survived despite White House disinterest.

It is Blatchford's view that the President has been much more isolated in domestic issues than in foreign affairs. Drawing upon his contradictory experiences in Peace Corps and Action, he says:

"I got the impression that the President wasn't as directly interested in the domestic side of things. Lyndon Johnson had gotten into too many things and ruined himself in the process. He wasn't going to make the same mistake."

In the discussion of White House staff officials, the person most frequently singled out for criticism is Ehrlichman, who once was Butler's moot court partner at Stanford.

"John takes pride in being a tough person, in being decisive," says Butler. "He has no philosophy at all, no theory of government."

Butler says that Ehrlichman, who threw a farewell party for him on the presidential yacht, was "straight" in his personal dealings and more approachable than other administration officials on such issues as Cambodia and women's rights.

But he believes that Ehrlichman did not understand the difference between "obstructing justice" in a public position and fighting a delaying legal action in a Seattle municipal court.

"The public ethics now displayed in Watergate are what you find everyday in the business world," Butler believes. "And Ehrlichman had never been in a position of power."